

Nagl is a meticulous arranger, setting moods where anything can happen. However, his provocative transmutations, while quick-shifting, always flow naturally. So even at its most circus-like, his music is accessible, compelling, and elegant.

The same can be said of **Liberty Ellman's** outstanding new CD, *Ophiuchus Butterfly* (Pi). A Bay Area native now living in New York City, Ellman has been working with veteran bandleader Henry

Threadgill for the past few years. And the guitarist seems to have adopted his mentor's Very Very Circus-approach to composition, which involves stratified harmonic structures, off-kilter yet propulsive grooves, and unusual time signatures. Not unlike Threadgill's renowned VVC band, Ellman's younger-generation group also features a beefy bottom-end (with tuba and contrabass), plus a versatile frontline (of six-string, and alto and tenor saxes), and an octopus drummer (Matthew Shipp bandmate Gerald Cleaver).

One might expect that the unusual syncopation on the title track and "The Naturalists" — both Threadgill-inspired big-top bounces — would make listeners crazy. But despite their willful edge, each of these tunes is smoothly executed, evoking

the image of a jagged but sharp, clean knife slicing through a rich five-layer cake. The melodies on the ballad, "Aestivation," surprise as well with their oblique warmth. And "Pretty Words, Like Blades" weaves multi-tiered sax lines into a gamelan-like scaffold with spectacular results.

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outside/in

**Avant-fun? Go figure.**

**By Sam Prestianni**